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AND WHO WILL REVERE THE BLACK GIRL

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While the mainstream media continues to narrowly define justice and reduce the site of its presence or absence to murder scenes and court cases, justice is often foreclosed long before someone is murdered and we must #SayHerName. To expand the project of Black mattering beyond race and physical death, this essay animates how body policing through school dress code policy sanctions racial-sexual violence and provide girls with an ultimatum: either abandon body sovereignty and self-expression, or accept the consequences of being read as a distraction, a problem. (Re)membering classic Black feminist theory and the 2013 case of Vanessa Van Dyke, this essay locates these underrecognized facets of state violence as an extension of the #SayHerName project. Through a Black girlhood studies framework, the author underscores embodiment as an essential measure of justice and reframes mattering through the importance of Black girls' crowns.

Keywords: *embodiment; hair; Black Feminist Theory; transgression; carceral misogyny*

BLACK GIRLS ARE BLACK MATTERS

In 1966, civil rights activist and artist Abbey Lincoln asked “Who will revere the black woman?” Narrating the logics that render Black womxn deserving of dehumanization, violence, and unworthy of protection, Lincoln identified the aches endured by Black womxn as symptomatic of white supremacy, patriarchy, and the frustrated masculinities of Black

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men. “Hence, the black mother, housewife, and all-round girl Thursday is called upon to suffer both physically and emotionally every humiliation a woman can suffer and still function” (Lincoln 2013 [1966]).

Within Lincoln’s outrage is a visceral understanding that the Black womxn, as a popularized figure and everyday human, is denied respect, protection, and care, whereas the violence endured is justified by biology, gender expectations, and racist, sexist logic. Half a century later, Black feminist cultural worker Simmons (2012) expanded Lincoln’s question to include Black LGBTQ people, asking, “Who will revere us?” Simmons documented the victim-blaming and lack of national outcry and communal activism in response to the disproportionate sexual and physical violence experienced by Black people who are subjected to multiple and interlocking forms of oppression. Both of these important texts demand that attention be paid to the ways race and gender conjoin, best identified as the contemporary term *misogynoir* (Bailey 2014)—the coming together of anti-Black sentiment and the subjugation of Black womxn—to present a set of cultural logics wherein Black womxn and girls are not understood as victims and therefore do not receive a helping hand. Instead, they are blamed for their experience and face a series of other gaslighting tactics to defer responsibility away from the systems and people that inflict this violence upon them.

In this article, I expand the project of Black mattering beyond race and physical death. To begin, I draw on classic Black feminist texts to broaden understandings of the carceral state to incorporate institutions, such as schools, and practices, including body surveillance, that confine girls of color. Later, I introduce Black girlhood studies as an intellectual home to recognize how girls navigate embodied experiences amid carceral surveillance. I provide an analysis of how schooling is a form of social control and reconstructs social inequality by policing girls, including how Black girls choose to wear their hair. I draw upon the 2013 case of Vanessa Van Dyke to illustrate that at the conjunction of the Black body, hair, and school policy is a distinct form of carceral misogynoir and gendered anti-Black racism. I situate the underrecognized facets of state violence experienced by Black girls within the #SayHerName project and theorize how the inclusion of embodiment expands the texture of carcerality.

BLACK FEMINISM AND AN EXPANDED UNDERSTANDING OF THE CARCERAL STATE

In keeping with the reciprocal role of activism and scholarship in shaping the field of carceral state studies and the recognized role bodies play

in the experience and perpetuation of carcerality, I turn to Black feminist political and poetic theorization. Specifically, I utilize the work of the Combahee River Collective (1977) and Jordan's (2007) "Poem about My Rights" to analyze how the Black and female body (neither necessarily feminine nor cisgender) is regarded as a carceral site for control. In their discussion of the carceral nation, Richie and Martensen (2020, 13) defined carcerality as "a set of political commitments that are independent from data about actual occurrences of lawbreaking." Related, Combahee's statement specified the conditions enforcing alongside ideological and structural realities anchoring Black womxn's oppression. Penned as interlocking systems of oppression, they linked liberation to body politics and systems—such as racism, capitalism, and sexism. By stating "We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race" (Combahee River Collective 1977, 16). They emphasized the simultaneity of these systems and how they expropriate Black womxn from power over their own bodies. Central to the Collective's theorization of how hierarchies sustain Black womxn's oppression is the way certain identities displace others and shape interpersonal experience and access to care:

The material conditions of most Black women would hardly lead them to upset both economic and sexual arrangements that seem to represent some stability in their lives. Many Black women have a good understanding of both sexism and racism, but because of the everyday constrictions of their lives cannot risk struggling against them both. (Combahee River Collective 1977, 19)

The Collective's layered and bodily mediated analysis of oppression names the constriction experienced when one inhabits a surveilled bound body and offers a view of freedom fighting enacted by Black womxn.

In "Poem about My Rights," a poetic narration of the consequences of racial–sexual oppression discussed earlier by the Combahee Collective, Jordan (2007, 309) wrote "Why I can't go out without changing my clothes my shoes my body posture my gender identity my age. . . .Because I am the wrong sex the wrong age the wrong skin." She theorizes the myriad ways that Blackness is deemed wrong across geographies, interpersonal interactions, and the daily traversing of space. For Jordan, these instances illustrate how a designation of "wrong" forecloses full humanity, self-expression, and body sovereignty while sanctioning imperialism, gentrification, gendered racial violence, and other forms of domination:

and whether it's about walking out at night
 or whether it's about the love that I feel or
 whether it's about the sanctity of my vagina or
 the sanctity of my national boundaries.

A precursor to carceral studies, Jordan's theorization of wrongness expanded the terrain for understanding the carceral as an entanglement of racialized logics and control. To ensure that structural logics and the bodies affected by them are part of the conversation, carceral state studies illuminates "how carceral logic and carceral control expand beyond the prison and. . .[are]. . . in fact the social fabric of the United States" (Martensen 2020, 1). In an overview of the nascent field of carceral state studies, Martensen documented how "tough on crime politics" orders racialized people's experiences. This work builds on writing by Angela Davis and Mariame Kaba, wherein racism places some bodies closer to confinement, violence, and death (Gilmore 2007).

BLACK GIRLHOOD STUDIES REVERES THE BLACK GIRL

I emphasize the call and response built into Lincoln's original question—"Who will revere the black woman?"—by extending this question to Black girls. I offer "Black girlhood studies" as my callback. An extension of Black feminist thought, Black girlhood studies "makes visible creative, intellectual, and cultural production of Black girls and Black girlhood while simultaneously illuminating the dearth of attention afforded Black girls and Black girlhood" (Hill 2018, 385). Parallel to the #SayHerName project, which contests the invisibility of police and gender violence enacted upon Black girls and womxn, this field highlights the underrecognized contribution of Black girls to Black resistance, culture, and survival. Publicly named by Brown (2009), this interdisciplinary field of study ushers in a paradigmatic shift in the treatment of Black girls away from deficiency and toward celebration. Akin to Jordan's (2007) insurgency and closing declarations in "Poem about My Rights"—"I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name, my name is my own my own my own"—Black girlhood studies begins by recognizing Black girls as knowledge producers, freedom fighters, and cultural shifters. In "10 Years of Black Girlhood Celebration," Kwakye, Hill, and Callier (2017, 1) named two

key offerings of the field: “a better understanding of how they [Black girls] survive and thwart systemic violence and persistent inequalities, and a celebration of their ingenious approaches to real and imagined social change.” Black girlhood studies illuminates innovation and knowledge crafted amid legacies of anti-Blackness and racialized femininity that give shape to Black girlhood and what it means to be a Black girl and womxn.

When Brown (2009) established celebration as a key pillar of the field, the Black girl as a figure and political orientation emerged; it expanded the landscape of Black girl subjectivities while bringing the politics of the body to the foreground and unearthing the underrealized potential of Black girlhood. Growing out of pathways forged by the insurgence of Black women’s studies and the staging of Black girl life through performance and poetry, Black girlhood studies explicitly celebrates girls and womxn. While “Black” here refers to the racial, cultural, imaginative, and historical collective heterogeneity shared by people of African descent, “girl” expands age and biology (Gill 2012).

Holding celebration as a central tenet to scholarship involving Black girlhood is an academic side-eye to theories, tropes, and representations promoted and sustained by the simultaneous pathologization and hyper(in)visibility of Black girls. To work from a Black girlhood studies framework assumes that embodiment and disembodiment processes are enacted on the youthful girl body, that girlhood and womxnhood are not linear successions but rather co-constitutive interstices, and that Black girls are creators and intentional decision makers about whether, when, and how they share knowledge. Finally, the work within this field attends to what occurs at the location of the body of Black girls without allowing their embodied experiences of white supremacy and gendered racial violence to define them.

SCHOOLING, SOCIAL CONTROL, AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

While Black girls disproportionately experience overt violence in school, some of their less-examined injuries involve the policing of their embodiment and self-expression. Black feminist and anti-racist scholars have captured the variety and textures of carceral violence endured by Black girls in schools (Annamma et al. 2019; Morris 2016; Morris and Perry 2016; Wun 2018). Far from being innocuous, these oppressive practices are best understood in terms of Patricia Williams’ concept of

“spirit-murdering.” Recognizing both the legal holdings of racism and its visceral, continuous effects, how “the legacy of killing finds its way into cultural expectations, archetypes, and ‘isms’” (156), Williams (1987, 129) defines spirit-murdering as a “crime, an offense so deeply painful and assaultive.” By definition, spirit-murdering is iterative, layered, and built into identity, body politics, and systems.

Although schools are potential sites of social transformation, Black girlhood studies critiques the ways in which schools operate foundationally as sites of white supremacist and hetero-patriarchal social reproduction. Attendance to the policing of Black girls’ hair in school spaces reflects a Black feminist understanding of carcerality as a bodily experience that outstretches actual cages. Qualitative literature on the 2013 case of Vanessa Van Dyke highlights Black feminist theory as a pathway for expanding our understanding of the carceral to underscore the role body policing plays as a particular machination of carcerality, and to locate schools as stakeholders in Black girls’ embodiment. I use this example to advance Black girlhood studies as a sanctuary and intervention to the hyper(in)visibility of Black girls in conversations about racial justice.

POLICING BLACK GIRLS’ HAIR

In November 2013, a year before the launching of the #SayHerName project, 12-year-old Vanessa Van Dyke faced the dilemma of changing her hair—through cutting or straightening it—or being expelled. She had been enrolled at Faith Christian Academy in Orlando, Florida, since the third grade. School authorities identified Van Dyke’s hair as the cause of her being bullied, and thus a problem. At this privately funded school, the principal and pastor served as authority figures when mandating she cut her afro or be expelled. Such governance aligns with U.S. racialization and contemporary school policies, wherein Black bodies are subjected to harsher punishment for dress code and other noncriminal offenses (Crenshaw et al. 2016).

Although the school quickly recanted its position after facing backlash, the harm had occurred. Van Dyke’s mother recounts contacting the local news after speaking with the pastor and learning that he supported the ultimatum (personal communication, December 21, 2020). Whether it was the unwanted attention, disruption in the school ethos, or something else, their retraction does not change the fact that Vanessa experienced a potentially life-changing threat from school authorities as she was instructed to choose between her very self-definition and her education.

During an interview with *HuffPost* (2013), she shared the significance she attached to her hair: “It says that I’m unique. First of all, it’s puffy and I like it that way. I know people will tease me about it because it’s not straight. I don’t fit in”. The school administrator’s initial decision was supported by the school’s student handbook, which insisted, “Hair must be a natural color and must not be a distraction.” Returning to Jordan’s (2007) theorization, I infer from the ongoing politics of Black hair that Vanessa’s hair, specifically its volume, was a “distraction” because Black hair itself is considered wrong and therefore unworthy of protection. Moreover, buried beneath the emphasis on her so-called violation was the school’s failure to address the bullying Vanessa endured for months. Vanessa recently revealed that she was blamed for her own bullying:

I got called down to the principal’s office and that’s when she said, “Well, I think the bullying is because of your hair. You know you might need to cut or straighten it, whatever you need to do for you to not be bullied anymore.” (personal communication, December 21, 2020)

The machination of spirit-murdering was at play in the school’s attempt to coerce Vanessa into containing her Blackness and by deeming her responsible for her own bullying.

As educational researchers attend to inequities within educational policy, it is imperative to complicate the narrative by exploring the ways carcerality operates at the level of social identities, sartorial choices, and comportment. To illustrate the relationship between policies and bodies, Pillow (2003) asserted “At the same time and likely precisely because ‘bodies are dangerous’ policies are all about bodies—controlling, regulating, shaping and (re)producing bodies. Bodies, nevertheless, remain uncontrollable.” Moreover, the compounded nature of anti-Black racism and conventions of femininity engender hostile and harmful realities for Black girls.

As a cultural signifier, rite of passage, and form of adornment, Black girls’ hair stylization is a representation of who they see themselves to be. Vanessa’s transgressions—to refuse to change her hair, to continue to *be* as she saw fit—kept her present in her body while it made her a target of first bullying and then school discipline. Hair policies that plague the educational journeys of Black girls and demand that they choose between their education and maintaining their sense of self and body sovereignty are acts of spirit-murdering. Black girls’ deliberations about their own bodies become resistance and politicized self-definition within the racial-sexual politics of U.S. society.

As with the hypersurveillance of Black girls' comportment and the sanctions imposed on them when authorities label them as "defiant," Black girls receive additional punishment for being "distracting" (Wun 2016). As early as elementary school, Black girls learn that their hair affects their treatment in school, and they reach an impasse: my crown or your comfort (Essien and Wood 2021). As schools use hair policies to deny Black girls who proudly don natural hairstyles or box braids access to sports or entry to prom, or require their presence at in-school suspension, they engender the forced and farcical choice between culture and academic success (Williams 2017). When they are told that their hair "could distract from the respectful and serious atmosphere [the school] strives for," Black girls face two inconvenient truths: first, that they are considered a problem, and second, that they must decide whom to believe (Persch 2013).

School policies, from zero tolerance to dress codes, serve as quotidian tools for advancing the carceral state and supporting anti-Black racism. These policies are processes of social control through which Black girls learn their socially designated space through punishment and mistreatment. Situating schooling as a web of curricular and cultural processes that bridge schools and society, punitive measures faced by girls for prioritizing self-definition are seen as conditioning strategies meant to break the spirit.

Echoed in Combahee River Collective's (1977) articulation of the oppression experienced by Black womxn and in Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith's (1982) insistence that self-definition is integral to Black women's studies is the marginalization at the connection of Black girls' minds and bodies. It is in the regulation of Black girls' bodies that we see another dimension of carceral, racial injustice. Attuning to the body, both *de jure* dress code policies and their *de facto* deployment attempt spirit-murdering and repress the freedom of embodiment for Black girls. Such policies are misogynoiristic and gender-specific forms of spirit-murdering that produce embodied wounds.

CONCLUSION

While mainstream media continue to narrowly define justice and reduce the site of its presence or absence to murder scenes and court cases, justice is often foreclosed and throttled long before someone is murdered. We must #SayHerName, long before a Black person wheezes "I can't breathe," and even long before a girl is tone-policed while testifying in

defense of her friend's murder (Baker et al. 2020; CNN 2013). Justice exists when Black Lives Matter is practiced and evidenced at the site of the Black body. While it must include redress for filmed murders, botched raids, and lives taken at the hands of the police, the prison industrial complex, and other forms of institutionalized injustice, it is imperative also to attend to everyday forms of violence that make Black mattering untenable (Carrega and Ghebremedhin 2020).

Body policing through dress code policy sanctions racial–sexual violence and forces girls to partition themselves or accept the consequences of being read as a distraction, a disruption, a problem. While these rules infringe on the daily in-school lives of girls, they also have the potential to shrink girls' sense of self, undermine the significance of the overt forms of violence Black girls experience in schools, and murder girls' spirits (Watts 2009).

Black feminists cleared a path to see layers of confinement while elucidating dimensions of intersectional violence and injury. This trail is now taken up in Black girlhood studies, which reveals the many impasses Black girls face and the lessons their responses offer us about justice and possibility. Know and remember that racial justice is about quality of life. It is about the extent to which material (not theoretical) opportunity, respect, and belief is afforded without hesitation. A Black girl's crown matters.

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